

THE VANISHING RHINOCEROS AND ASSAM'S  
WILD LIFE SANCTUARIES

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BY

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All living rhinoceroses are included in a single family, and though externally similar, differ considerably in their history and anatomy. As a result of extensive migration and adaptation to different climates, terrains, and feeding-grounds the various species became distinct early in their history. Even the two living African representatives (which incidentally are both two-horned, the black or commoner, and the white which is a rarer and larger animal) probably separated and became distinct species as much as a million years ago.

Differences in feeding habits, which in turn develop from originally different environments, has affected the distribution of the various species, the Great One-horned Rhinoceros being mainly confined to the grassy plains of North Eastern India where its specially adapted high-crowned grinding teeth enable it to fulfil its role as a grazing animal, while the other two species are mainly browsers with short-crowned teeth and are confined to tree-forest zones. All the species have a three-toed foot, unlike the elephant which has four toes, and all share the habit of wallowing in mud and water. The two-horned *Sumatrensis* is the smallest of the three, and its skin is smooth and covered with bristles as distinct from its one-horned cousins whose skins are tuberculated, while its ears are fringed with hair. The difference between the Lesser One horned *Sondaicus* and the Great One-horned *Unicornis* is the more pronounced development in the latter of the horn, particularly in the female. In the *Unicornis* moreover the fold of skin in front of the shoulders is not continued right across the back as is the case in the other two species, while the great armour-like shields of thick skin are very characteristic.

All the three species of Rhinoceros have suffered persecution at the hands of man throughout the ages as the result of superstitious beliefs in the magical effects of the horn in rendering

poison innocuous, while the Chinese believe that it has a rejuvenating effect, and some Hindus believe that every part of its body is sacred and valuable. A habit which has probably assisted in their reduction is that of depositing their dung in the same place for some time in what eventually become large heaps as also their habit of wallowing in mudholes which make it easy for man to lay in wait for them. All the species of Rhinoceroses are reputed to have good hearing and scent, but poor sight, and as a result are inclined to be touchy at times, but they will not attack man unless provoked or suddenly surprised, though like the rogue elephant there is the rogue Rhino! Rhinoceroses held their own fairly well in recent time until advent of the fire-arm, but they have rapidly lost ground since then. In the case of the Sondaicus and Sumatrensis, which mostly inhabit tree-forest, there is less excuse for man to interfere with it, but in the case of the Great One-Horned Rhinoceros, which as I pointed out before, is a grazer and is mainly confined to low-lying grassy areas, there has been a direct clash between its interests and those of man during the past century with the opening up of the grassy plains of North Eastern India for cultivation and grazing.

In Assam this Rhinoceros, which is to-day our sole surviving representative of the race, is found in two distinct types of forests the first type a belt which stretches along the foot-hill of the Himalayas from Nepal through North Bengal as far as the Darrang district of Assam and in which it moves between the grassy swamp of the Terai up through the Bhabar tree forests to the foot-hills, and the second type the grassy areas found near the Brahmaputra river, of which the last surviving remnants to-day are the Kaziranga, Laokhowa and Orange Sanctuaries. Pollok found the animal extremely plentiful eighty years ago in the plains of Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgong and Darrang, in areas where to-day jute and paddy fields stretch in un-broken monotony. He shot 44 in seven years and wounded many more! Those were the days of the smooth-bore gun firing spherical balls and the big-bore black-powder rifle, and quantities of game must have been wounded and lost with such weapons when compared to our modern high velocity rifles, which at any rate have the merit of being clean and merciful killers! He records that the horn of the Rhinoceros was useless as a trophy though prized

Scenically this is the most attractive Sanctuary in Assam and undoubtedly contains the greatest variety of species, including bison and swamp deer. There are supposed to be more than 100 Rhinos in this Sanctuary, as also up to 200 buffaloes, 100 elephants and 100 bison. Swamp Deer were once to be seen in numbers in this Reserve and in the Kahitama Reserve which extends on the South of this Sanctuary, but are now very scarce.

(5). The Sonai-Rupai Game Sanctuary in Darrang District is 85 square miles in area and like the Manas Sanctuary extends from the Himalayan foot hills southwards. It is supposed to contain a few Rhino in addition to Bison and a number of elephants. This Sanctuary like the Manas, has the advantage of being bordered on the north by the Himalayan foot-hills and is part of a continuous belt of Reserves stretching East and West so that animals are free to move about, but this advantage is nullified by the resultant vulnerability of the area which can effectively be protected only from the south.

The Pabha or Milroy Buffalo Sanctuary, 19 square miles in area is situated in North Lakhimpur and deserves mention in passing, as a Sanctuary created exclusively for the protection of the magnificent species of Assam Wild Buffalo, of which there are probably some 50-100 animals here. It is possible that this area once had Rhinos and elephants.

These then are the last strongholds of *Rhinoceros unicornis* in Assam, and if the small Bengal Sanctuary is included, in the world, for I deliberately exclude the few animals that are to be found in Cooch Behar and Nepal where they are still not protected. What are the prospects of preserving this animal for eternity? Bengt Berg was pessimistic and he wrote in his beautifully illustrated book, "On the Trail of the Rhino", that "in another hundred years the skeletons of this animal will be seen along with similar ones of extinct animals in the Museums of the world and people will stare in wonder... ..Zoologists will look with pity and envy on the photos in this book, pity for the poor man who had to put up with such inferior photographic equipment but envy at his luck to have lived before the Rhino became extinct!" Certainly, if we are to judge from the rapid rate of

disappearance of this species in the last 100 years, it would appear as if the struggle is hopeless. Yet, it appears as if the Rhino is holding its own in the Kaziranga and North Kamrup (Manas) Sanctuaries at least and if only sufficient assistance can be given to it there is reason to believe that this species can be saved. But will Man in his ruthless search for land and food give the Rhinoceros the peace it requires ?

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PROSPECTS OF BEE KEEPING AT TAKDAH AND  
THE DARJEELING HILLS ON A  
COMMERCIAL BASIS

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1. GENERAL.

Everyone be it Government or consumer would welcome the availability of pure honey, which is in great demand, instead of the product of dubious quality which is at present sold in the bazaars as PURE HONEY. The utility of the honey bee is realised the world over as regards the increase in the yield of certain crops by pollination.

It therefore seems a pity that but for FINANCE these prospects could not be put into immediate production as the potential bee keeper is the impoverished cultivator or small holder.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru wrote the following in the Indian Bee Journal in 1942.